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THE SHAKESPEARE SKEPTICS

BY KARL YOUNG

DURING the last generation or two, and especially during our own, the art of Shakespeare has been undergoing an energetic re-examination. One may fairly say, indeed, that we live in a new period of Shakespeare criticism, a period characterized by skepticism. One evidence of this new critical temper is the apprehensiveness of those who have no share in it. On the occasion of the recent tercentenary observances, for example, Mr. John Palmer could write such disheartened words as these: "At no time in our literary history was the English public, as represented by its critics and leaders of taste, less qualified to admire and celebrate William Shakespeare. Never was his fame so low or so confused." Although I must squarely combat Mr. Palmer's opinion, and can have no part in his despair, I recognize the source of his critical disaffection; for, I repeat, a skeptical attitude toward Shakespeare's art is characteristic of our time, and may be discerned in contemporary critics of every degree of professional responsibility. I may add also that the expressions of this temper show almost every degree of discretion, from judicial candor to impish abandon. The British poet laureate writes:

> Shakespeare should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that, if out of veneration for his genius we are led to admire or even tolerate such things, we may be thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience, and learning contamination from those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist.

The most provocative theatrical critic in contemporary England—no other than Mr. Shaw—presses the matter further:

> It is possible, perhaps, to cure people of admiring, as distinctly characteristic of Shakespeare, the false, forced rhetoric, the callous sensation-mongering in

murder and lust, the ghosts and combats, and the venal expenditure of all the treasures of his genius on the bedizenment of plays which are as wholes, stupid toys. . . . The fact is, we are growing out of Shakespeare . . . he is nothing but a household pet. His characters still live; his word pictures of woodland and wayside still give us a Bank-holiday breath of country air; his verse still charms us; his sublimities still stir us; the common-places and trumperies of the wisdom which age and experience bring to all of us are still expressed by him better than by anybody else; but we have nothing to hope from him and nothing to learn from him—not even how to write plays, though he does that so much better than most modern dramatists.

Those who speak from professorial chairs may be more measured in their utterances, but they are no less incisive. "Again and again," observes Professor Stoll, "it appears that theatrical effect, or the light and shade of the whole, is more precious in the dramatist's eye than a character's integrity. . . . No one has more imaginative sympathy than Shakespeare; but he employs it by fits and starts, often neglects motivation and analysis, takes a leap as he passes from one 'soul-state' to another, and, not content with the inconsistencies of life, falls into the contradictions of convention and artifice."

These *dicta* I summon not as being precise and complete statements of the varying positions held by the several critics, but rather as fair representations of the critical temper of their school. Taken generally the skeptical criticism of our day is not a disparagement of Shakespeare's mastery of language or of human emotion; it is essentially an arraignment of his artistic procedure. These critics readily admit that Shakespeare did many great things better than anyone else has ever done them; but they are insistently maintaining that his plays are defective as harmonious works of art. The charges brought in detail are numerous, and show a wide variety. Some of them echo the fault-finding of Shakespeare's own day, some are obviously personal, and some are insignificant. The most penetrating of the pronouncements seem to deal with a problem that may be described in simple terms as the relation of character to action. And this problem deserves particular attention, for in scrutinizing Shakespeare's habit of developing personages from stories we may, I think, best prepare ourselves for understanding the nature of his art and for identifying the essence of his power.

I

Some of our contemporary Shakespeareans, then, are reporting, from this play or that, a fundamental artistic defect. This lesion in the organism of the drama may be described, simply, as a cleavage between the personality and the action in which he is engaged—an incongruity between the character and the plot. In essential parts of certain of these plays the critic finds the personality of the hero developing into qualities and magnitudes that do not conform to the fabric of the action. The personality seems to outgrow the design. A psychological inconsistency is discerned between men and their deeds. What the hero *does*, we are told, cannot be reconciled with what he *is*.

Let us observe the application of this notion to such a play as *Othello*. For the action of this tragedy Shakespeare availed himself of an Italian novel of Cinthio, and to the events of this tale the dramatist adhered with substantial fidelity. As one reads the Italian story one casually observes that the hero's jealousy is aroused very suddenly, and that the tempter succeeds with rare facility. But this observation gives the reader no pause, for the unnamed Moor has no substance in the way of personality, and one is ready to accept whatever the narrator may offer. The tale is a mere succession of events, and in the absence of human vitality the reader must be receptive to the excitement of the happenings or he will receive nothing at all. The Moor yields easily; but why not? He has no human authenticity with which to resist any action that the story-teller may record or contrive.

Now no one need be told that, having chosen this narrative fabric for his action, Shakespeare erected in the midst of the borrowed events a fresh and potent creation whom we know as Othello. This personage occupies the rôle of Cinthio's Moor; but the man, Othello, never existed in the world until Shakespeare created him. If, then, in the midst of a story by Cinthio we encounter this intense person created by Shakespeare, we may justly enough inquire whether this new dramatic figure will submit to the action provided for him. Will all of the new psychology conform to all of the old intrigue?

The orthodox belief is, of course, that the behavior of Othello is psychologically rational: that he is a pure and trustful spirit who fell through the uncanny guile of Iago. But this doctrine the skeptics of our day do not readily accept, and the chief obstacle to their acceptance is the personality of Othello himself.

Through the first part of the play—before the temptation—this personage moves before us in the full dignity of his passionate love, his eloquence, his poetry, his self-control, his sagacity as a public servant. Othello's assured command over Brabantio's turbulence, his romantic charm and quiet candor in the council-chamber, his military mastery and beatification in love after his arrival in Cyprus—these phenomena reveal the lofty personage who is made to succumb to the manœuvers of Iago within one scene of the third act, and who at the end of the scene is found kneeling beside his tempter, swearing blood and vengeance. One fairly wonders whether the ready vengeance and the kneeling figure are not a bit of sensational story rather than part of the man we have by this time come to know. For after the contrivances of Iago have run their course of agitation, this same man, Othello, emerges again from the frantic intrigue, and once more we feel the presence of the earlier personality, in his pride, now pathetic, in his power, now softened, in his love, now understood. Would this man have succumbed to jealousy through such solicitings as those provided in this intrigue? Would Othello have trusted this calumniator rather than his own wife? Could the person that Othello *is* ever have done all the things that Othello is made to *do*? The skeptics say he could not.

Professor Stoll puts it thus:

> It is only by means of a specious and unreal psychology, . . . that he is made incapable of distrusting the testimony which his whole nature forbids him to accept, to the point of distrusting the testimony and character of those whom both his nature and their own forbid him to discredit. . . .

"That jealousy . . . is purely melodramatic jealousy." Mr. Shaw declares . . . "The actor cannot help himself by studying his part acutely, for there is nothing to study in it. Tested by the brain, it is ridiculous: tested by the ear, it is sublime."

The skeptics hold, then, that the hero and the plot are in part irreconcilable, precisely because the force and richness of Othello have burst the bonds of the inherited intrigue.

Similar considerations confront us in *Macbeth*. The action of the play as it came to Shakespeare from the chroniclers was that of a blunt warrior engaged in barbaric events. Although these events may shock us, they are in no way improbable—they belong readily enough in the narrative of a bloody usurper with whose inner thought and emotion we have no vital contact. His disloyalty and brutality stir in us no qualms of incredulity.

In Shakespeare's hands, however, the brutal Macbeth is so transformed that through utterance after utterance we are admitted into the recesses of a pliable and emotional nature. The action of the old story still runs on through its occurrences of blood and violence; but the agent to whom these old crimes are attached is a new personage who owes his existence to Shakespeare. This personage has the old ambition and, in large measure, the old courage—the story required that. But in addition he possesses a new range of qualities, a new personality. In this new Macbeth of Shakespeare the essential element is a moral imagination declaring itself in images of horror. Conscience is in play before us in forms of frantic human distress. A personality of worth and elevation is speaking to us in the accent of a great nature. Once more, then, the skeptic raises what he calls his "common sense objection": namely, "that such a man would not have committed such deeds." "To propose this dastardly violation of honor to Macbeth," writes Mr. Bridges, "would, most probably, have stimulated his nobility and scared him from his crime, however fully he might have been predetermined on it."

But of all the plays the one that most readily invites the interest of the skeptics is the play which has always most charmed the average person and most fatally stimulated the curious. I refer, of course, to *Hamlet*. Although the old play of Thomas Kyd from which *Hamlet* derives is lost, the means are at hand for reconstructing its essential content. It was a revenge play of stirring and barbaric import. The hero was roughly but intelligibly presented as a man of action, delaying not primarily

because of internal inhibitions but because of baffling or encumbering circumstances. The obstacles to his vengeance were external: the King was surrounded by guards; hence the chief ground for delay was manifest and simple. The external obstacles, for example, clearly motivated the device of Hamlet's pretense of madness: Hamlet intended that this manœuver should assist him in evading the King's guard, and in killing his adversary. The old hero, then, was hard in his temper, vigilant and cautious, and relatively simple in his traits. He was a typical avenger.

In readapting this older play Shakespeare retained its outer fabric of personages and events—he was forced to keep them if he was to present the traditional story at all. In Shakespeare's play, then, we see, now and again, the old revenge hero in all his energy, hardness, and barbarity. There are found also the feigned madness and the succession of stage devices from the old version. But the old avenging Hamlet, belonging to an Elizabethan dramatic fashion, is largely supplanted by a new Hamlet who belongs to Shakespeare alone, a Hamlet who in this play exists for the first time. Of this new personage the essential characteristics are a noble mind and a sensitive moral nature.

For Shakespeare's Hamlet the essential dramatic conflict is no longer with external circumstances but with inner distress. The external obstacles are gone. Hamlet explicitly assures us that he has strength and means, and he repeatedly denounces himself for not using them. The essential consideration for Hamlet, then, is not the physical pursuit of Claudius and the achieving of vengeance upon his murderer. Hamlet's problem is how to readjust oneself to a world in which one's mother can commit adultery. For a son in this predicament what is the remedy? What will repair for him the ruined moral order? Surely not vengeance. The darkness that has settled over the beauty of Hamlet's world cannot be dispersed by the mere destruction of a life or two—or by any other means. For Shakespeare, then, the external matter of revenge has receded into unimportance. Shakespeare's passion is spent not in curious devices showing how an avenger might *act*, but in appalled contemplation of what an injured soul must *endure*.

If, then, in the midst of an old revenge play, with its stealthy hero and its sensational episodes, Shakespeare has reared a new personality gifted with thought and beauty and sorrow, is it to be expected that the play as a whole will betray no evidence of the proceeding? Will the new personality conform to all of the old mechanism of action and stage device? Consider, for example, so conspicuous a contrivance as Hamlet's pretense of madness. In his struggle with external difficulties the Hamlet of the older play had a reason for this expedient. It was, as we have seen, a stratagem that should aid him in outwitting his enemies. But from Shakespeare's play the King's body-guard and all other external obstacles to vengeance have been removed. And yet the old contrivance of pretended madness is retained—it must be retained, I repeat, if the traditional story is to be recognizable. But in the absence of the old motivation, what new reason does Shakespeare give for the device? He gives no reason at all. Thus at the end of the first act Hamlet's abrupt announcement of his intended deception leaves us baffled. Conjectural explanations have accumulated, and additional guesses may yet be added; but those who find this exercise entertaining should not forget that they are engaged in fancy, and that in inventing subtle explanations for Hamlet's stratagem they are applying their acumen precisely where Shakespeare allowed his own energy to relax.

The question asked above, whether Shakespeare has successfully united an inherited plot and a freshly created character into a new organism, is essentially equivalent to asking whether Hamlet's character and action have ever been satisfactorily explained. Many persons, I suppose, will readily reply in the affirmative; but the diversity, or partiality, or eccentricity of the explanations actually offered has aroused only a notorious distrust. Certainly Professor Bradley's able appraisal of the worthiest of the traditional theories has been distinctly unfavorable to them. The fact is that, through one limitation or another, the interpretations of the man Hamlet as merely fine and feeble, or conscience-stricken, or inordinately reflective, have all been found inadequate to the tragic data of the play itself.

For the last twenty years or so the view most favored by

scholars and readers has been that of Professor Bradley himself, which he phrases briefly thus: "The direct cause [of Hamlet's irresolution] was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances—a state of profound melancholy." This "melancholy," which Mr. Bradley undertakes to differentiate from insanity, accounts, he thinks, for all that *mélange* of elements in the play commonly felt as more or less contradictory and confused: Hamlet's inaction, his bursts of energy, his lucidity when alone or with Horatio, his keen satisfaction in trivial actions, his irritability, his hardness, his lethargy, his inability to understand why he delays. Furthermore this melancholy is thought to be "perfectly consistent also with that incessant dissection of the task assigned". Surely this interpretation does not lack inclusiveness.

Although the response of contemporary criticism to this view has not yet crystallized, one can surmise that it probably will, in its turn, be found inadequate. Some, at least, will probably urge that this new description is too pathetic for the character as a whole, believing, with Professor Stoll, "that Hamlet is meant for an heroic, not a pathetic figure." My own qualms concerning Professor Bradley's interpretation arise not from any one-sidedness in it, and not from its leaving this or that unexplained, but rather from its explaining too much. I fear that the sort of disease attributed to Hamlet not only accounts for everything that the hero does in the play, but would account also for virtually any conceivable thing that a man might do. I find it hard to think of an act that for Professor Bradley's Hamlet could be called inconsistent. But a man for whom no act would be inconsistent is, I suppose, commonly considered unintelligible.

I surmise, then, that Professor Wright approaches the truth in this recent conclusion: "No critic has made one perfectly comprehensible man out of Hamlet." So much the candid readers of the play seem more and more ready to concede. This, at any rate, is what the skeptic believes; and he thinks also that he knows the reason for the critics' failure to reconcile the personality of Hamlet with all the things he does. The plot, that is to say, is the work of Thomas Kyd; the person whom we know as Hamlet was created by Shakespeare. In various fundamental

respects the two elements are irreconcilable. "He [Shakespeare] retained all the archaic machinery," writes Mr. Robertson, "while transfiguring all the characters. A marvel this *tour de force* remains; but no jugglery can do away with the fact that the construction is incoherent, and the hero perforce an enigma, the snare of idolatrous criticism. . . . The ultimate fact is that Shakespeare *could not* make a psychologically or otherwise consistent play out of a plot which retained a strictly barbaric action while the hero was transformed into a super-subtle Elizabethan."

II

These few examples—Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet—must suffice to illustrate what the skeptic means by a cleavage between character and plot. Lively illustrations might, of course, be drawn from the comedies; for the same effect of incongruity is likely to arise whenever in the midst of a highly adventurous or fantastic story is created a personage of potent and rich vitality. But from what we have before us we may venture to estimate the justice of this modern skepticism, and its effect upon our appreciation of Shakespeare's power.

Is it, then, true that "at no time in our literary history was the English public, as represented by its critics and leaders of taste, less qualified to admire and celebrate William Shakespeare"? Is it true that never before has his fame been "so low or so confused"? My own answer would be that never before have Shakespeare's critics been so generally enlightened, his essential potencies so clearly felt, his fame so secure, and his contemporaneity so obvious. And this good fortune arises in large measure, I think, from the fact that in these times the readers of his plays are more directly fixing their attention where Shakespeare certainly fixed his. If we are losing interest in those vexed inquiries as to when Macbeth first conceived the murder, why Emilia was silent about the handkerchief, and why Hamlet pretended madness, we are the more direct and ardent in our attention to Macbeth, Desdemona, and Hamlet themselves. I venture to believe that the informed reader is giving himself more artlessly to the thought, the utterance, the poetry, the

crises of emotion and insight—those moments when the play disappears and we dwell for brief instants in the presence of life itself. This reader, I take it, is more willingly, and less fearfully, taking counsel of the school for which Mr. Shaw speaks when he advises us "to dissect out the absurd sensational incidents of the borrowed story from the genuine Shakespearean tissue". I shall not boast that our generation is the first to discern "the genuine Shakespearean tissue". My impression is, however, that the teachers and critics of our time will fall below their privilege if from the labors of the skeptic they do not derive means for delivering the general reader from the delusion that all things in Shakespeare are excellent, and, more particularly, that Shakespeare is a flawless *artist*.

The reader deserves deliverance, for example, from the spell of Coleridge when it emanates from a saying like this: "Shakespeare never followed a novel because he found such and such an incident in it, but because he saw that the story, as he read it, contributed to enforce, or to explain, some great truth inherent in human nature." One is depressed in the thought that under the influence of such an utterance thousands of school folk are expending their daily energies ingeniously straining at Shakespeare's plots in an attempt to find human significancies for every detail of the inherited mechanical fabric, meanwhile diverting their attention from the minds and rhythms of Shakespeare's creatures themselves.

And that one needs deliverance also from many a critic of our own time appears, for example, from the dominant tone of Mr. Palmer's tercentenary utterance, referred to at the outset: "We shall do well to assume, where the genius of Shakespeare seems in his greater works to falter or go astray, that the deficiency lies rather in ourselves than in Shakespeare. . . . Few critics have ever gone wrong in praise of Shakespeare. No critic that I know of has yet succeeded in calling him to judgment." This declaration may seem to have the virtue of making us humble; but does anyone suppose that so unrestrained a judgment can make us wise? Clearly there is still need for repeating Arnold's sober warning, "He [Shakespeare] is not altogether, nor even eminently, an artist."

But however salutary we may consider the historical criticism of the skeptic to be, we know well enough that, even at its best, it cannot speak the final interpretative word. It is only the first step toward appreciation and judgment. It restrains the cunning of the merely dexterous, and clears the way for comprehension. It gives salience to Shakespeare's uniqueness; it helps to isolate his essential power. If it happens to dispel a delusion as to Shakespeare's art, it declares the mystery of his creative force. Into that mystery, however, historical criticism does not, in its own right, penetrate. For that final entering into the essence of Shakespeare, historical method must appeal to insight.

And what is it that is left to insight? How is the personage who lives aloof from the action to be known at all? If a man's actions do not reveal him, what does? One may answer briefly: We know the Shakespearean personage not essentially through his physical acts but through his speech: through his emotion, his images, his phrases, his cadences, his poetry, his thought.

Mr. Shaw observes:

> The Shakespearean delineation of character owes all its magic to the turn of the line which lets you into the secret of its utterer's mood and temperament, not by its commonplace meaning, but by some subtle exaltation, or stultification, or shyness, or delicacy, or hesitancy, or what not in the sound of it. In short, it is the score and not the libretto that keeps the work alive and fresh.

III

In taking leave of this matter, however, one is tempted to utter a final reminder. If historical criticism, upon which the skeptic depends, is to be useful, it must be employed with tact. Shakespeare's usual literary procedure undoubtedly exposed him to the danger of incongruity between mediocre stories and weighty personalities; but it does not follow that he was incapable of eluding the danger. A judicial survey of the plays will, I think, disclose almost every degree of fundamental artistic concord. In some the concord is complete. Of these plays I can mention only one, the mightiest of them all: *King Lear*. The hero of the older play on this subject, which Shakespeare had before him, was a mild soul, who, when Goneril spurned him from her door, could respond thus:

> This punishment my heavy sins deserve,
> And more than this ten thousand thousand times;
> Else aged Leir them could never find
> Cruel to him, to whom he hath been kind.

It seems all but incredible that this plain personage should be an antecedent of Shakespeare's terrifying pagan:

> Hear, Nature! hear, dear goddess, hear!
> Suspend thy purposes, if thou didst intend
> To make this creature fruitful.
> Into her womb convey sterility!
> Dry up in her the organs of increase.
> . . . If she must teem,
> Create her child of spleen, that it may live
> And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!
> Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
> With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
> Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
> To laughter and contempt.

Anyone who can endure reading this superb and awful curse knows that Shakespeare spent himself relentlessly in the overpowering speech, rich mind, mad energy, and outrageous passion of Lear. Here, if ever, I infer, we might expect the violent new creation to burst through the limitations of the inherited fable, and to stand boldly apart from it. I venture the observation, however, that in none of the other Shakespearean tragedies are character and plot so solidly united. And I suggest a reason. In the story of King Lear Shakespeare, for once at least, laid hands upon a great moral action. The subject is as grave, as deep, as ominous as existence itself. *King Lear* is the tragedy of old age—of the tyranny brought by years, inescapable and unconscious, of the ingratitude of youth, inevitable and unconfessed. This is a mighty theme, presenting a human predicament elemental and perilous beyond love, family, nation, or honor. Into the midst of this story Shakespeare launched an energy of creative passion not matched in all art; and yet even this thrust of imagination left the fabric of the story intact. Thus it was that *King Lear* became the greatest of all dramas.

KARL YOUNG.